

Motivation, Confidence and Belief in One Freshman English Classroom

Lynn Ishikawa, Asia University

The question of how to motivate English language learners preoccupies many language instructors, but has received less attention from researchers than the issue of defining motivation itself (Dornyei & Otto, 1998). This paper documents one instructor's assessment of motivation, confidence, and belief among Freshman English students at Asia University in the beginning and end of an academic year of instruction using a self-report questionnaire. The main goal was to measure the change in student response after a year of instruction and to observe how the particular curriculum and classroom practices chosen by the instructor may have influenced student motivation, confidence, and belief in the ability to improve.

Participants

The subjects were first-year university students across three faculties (Business, Law, and Economics) in a required year-long English language course. Proficiency levels for all students were roughly in the middle of the university's placement scheme, with class placement being determined by scores on the Freshman English Placement Test administered before the semester began. The level of all students could be described as low-intermediate, however there were significant differences between classes in terms of ability and overall attitude. Business students scored noticeably higher on tests throughout the year. The survey was initially administered in April to 22 Business, 24 Law, and 22 Economics students, then again in late November to 17 Business, 22 Law, and 18 Economics students, with the latter numbers (57 total) being used for the final analysis of results.

Instrument

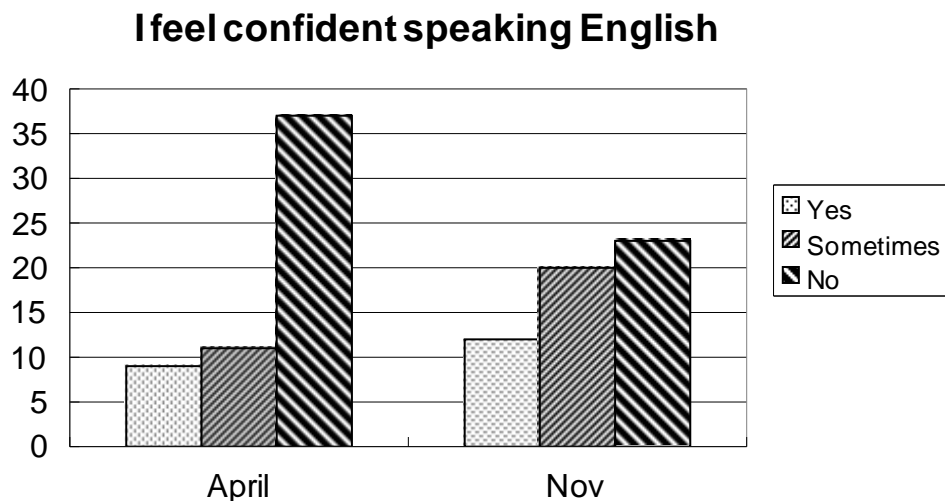
The survey was an 18-question self-report checklist questionnaire (see page 9) with response options of Yes, Sometimes, and No. To allow for analysis of individual results for pedagogic purposes, the survey was not anonymous, and only students who

completed both the April and the November questionnaires were included in the final analysis. All questions were in English with no written Japanese translation. Questions were read aloud after the surveys were distributed, and English discussion as well as verbal Japanese translation were provided for the three key questions: "I feel confident speaking English," "My motivation to learn English is high," and "I believe I can improve my English."

Of the 18 questions in the original questionnaire, six were chosen for the purposes of analysis in this paper: "I feel confident speaking English," "I like speaking English," "I enjoy studying English," "I liked my high school English class," "My motivation to learn English is high," and "I believe I can improve my English." The questions were chosen in order to assess not only motivation, confidence and belief, but also to examine the distinction between speaking and studying English. The purpose of including the question, "I liked my high school English class" was two-fold: to provide a seemingly static question by which to gauge reliability of student responses from April to November, and to begin to examine the extent to which attitudes toward English may have been set in high school.

Results

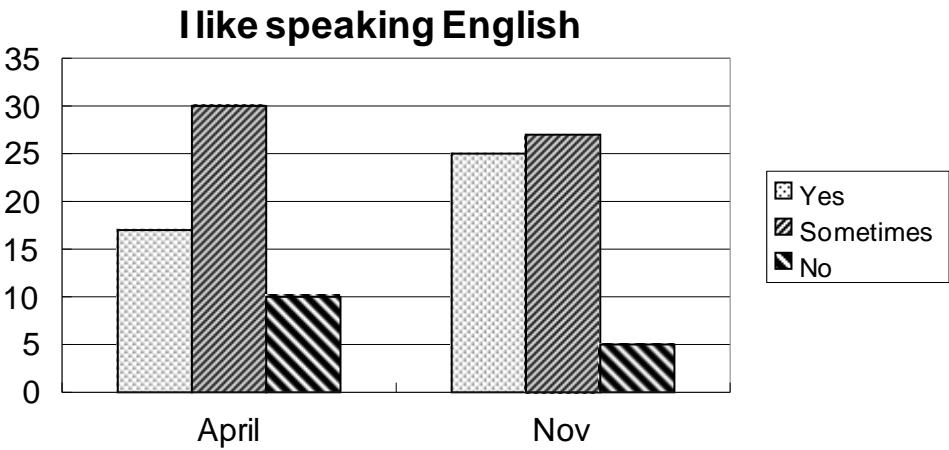
The following graphs illustrate the change in response for each question from April to November.



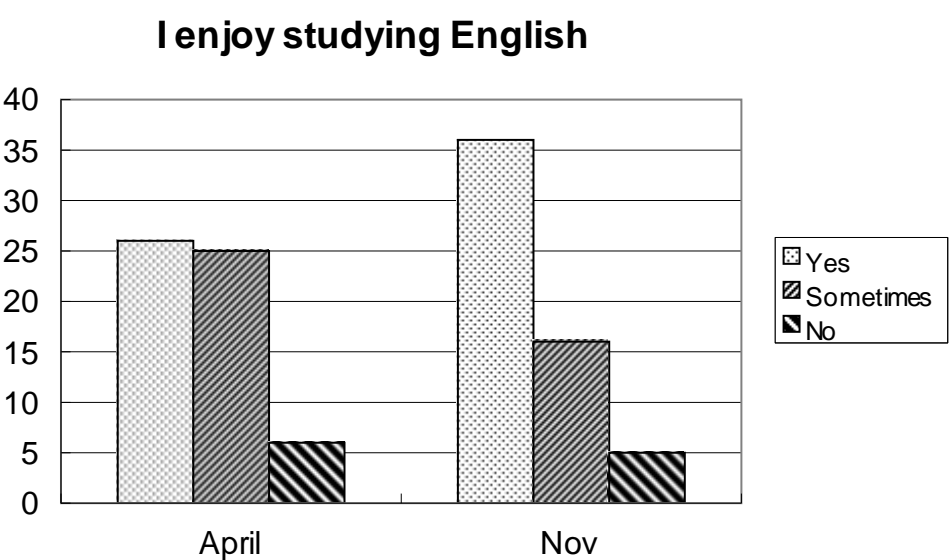
Graph 1*

* Two students did not check any response to this question in November.

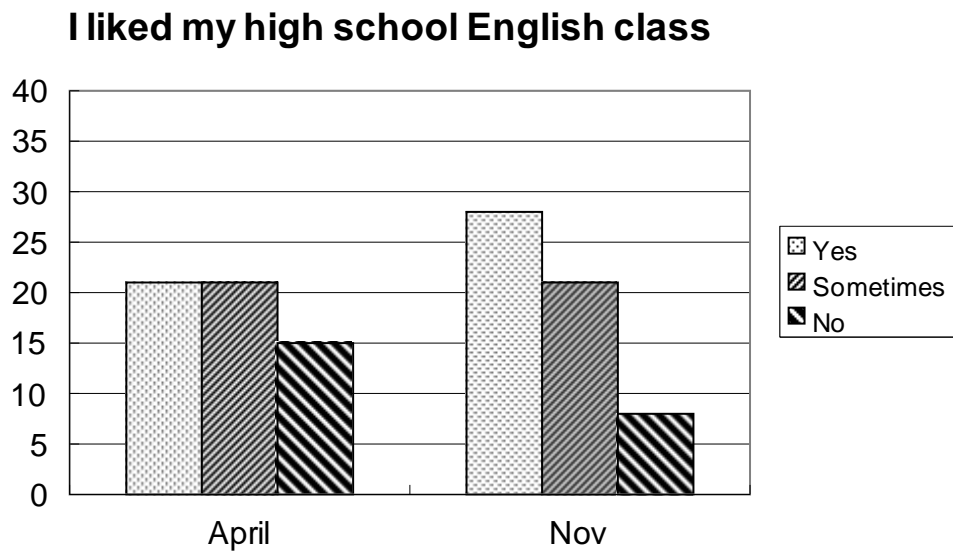
Graph 2



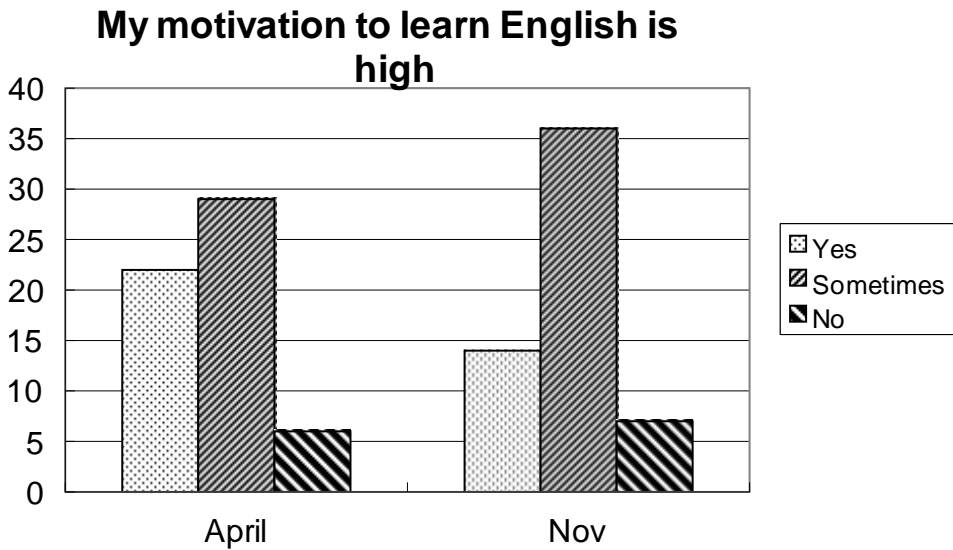
Graph 3



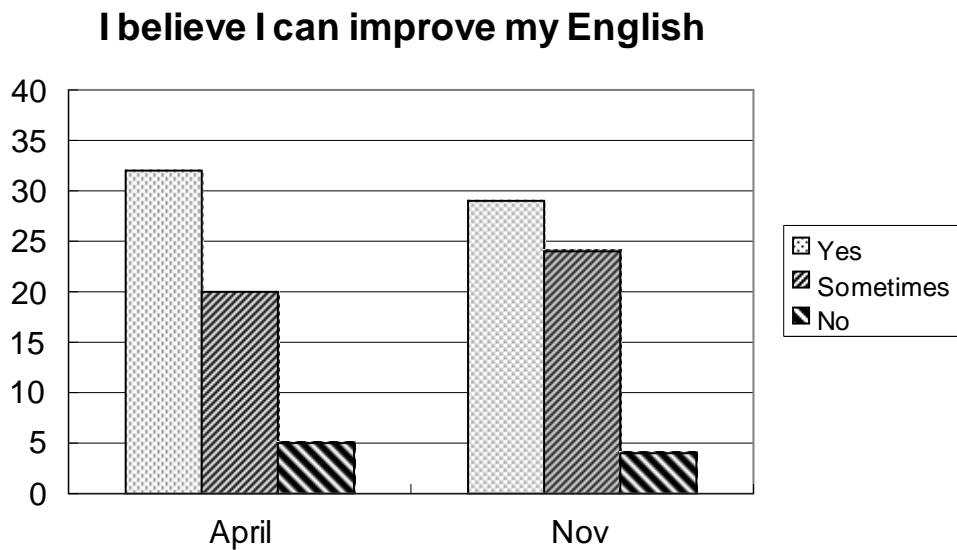
Graph 4



Graph 5



Graph 6



Several general points can be made about the data.

1. Overall, positive responses (reports of Yes and Sometimes) went up from April to November in all measures except motivation. In the belief measure, the gain was very slight (from 52 to 53).
2. The number of students reporting No to the question, "I feel confident speaking English" dropped significantly, from 37 in April to 23 in November.
3. According to the data, a majority of students seem to like speaking and studying English, are motivated to do so, and believe they can improve, despite not feeling confident about their ability. Further, there does not seem to be a marked difference between students' enjoyment of speaking and studying English.
4. The number of students reporting that their motivation to learn English is high (with a Yes response) decreased from 22 in April to 14 in November. Yes responses for the belief measure also decreased, but less markedly, from 32 to 29.
5. Despite being a seemingly static measure, Yes and No responses to "I liked my high school English class" changed from April to November, while the number of Sometimes responses stayed the same. Yes reports went up (21 to 28) and No reports went down (15 to eight). It is unclear whether the reason for this change is due to a lack of understanding of the statement itself or a change in students' memories of their high school English class.

Further, it is impossible to say to what extent the change was influenced by the students' experiences in the Freshman English course.

Discussion

This assessment was carried out in an effort to judge the effects of one Freshman English curriculum and set of classroom practices on student motivation, confidence, and belief. The curriculum included regular use of a textbook (of which all units were covered), bimonthly homework and tests, and one midterm speaking test. Classroom practices included dialogue practice, repetition of key phrases and vocabulary, listening exercises, and some speaking and writing, as well as games that reinforced the teaching point. Two movies were shown (with classroom activities and support), and parties were held at the end of the first semester and at Christmas. Thus the general approach could be described as relatively conventional.

Overall, the data suggests that participation in the class at least did not detract from students' confidence and enjoyment of English, but did slightly detract from their motivation, and made no significant difference in their beliefs about their ability to improve. Confidence in speaking in particular appears to have improved. Motivation, however, does not appear to have been positively influenced by participation in the course. One possible interpretation of this is that the opportunity to speak and study English, even in a fairly traditional atmosphere, increases student confidence and enjoyment of English; that is to say, exposure benefits most students in terms of confidence and overall attitude toward English. Motivation and belief in the ability to improve, however, seem to require something more. Exposure to the target language alone does not guarantee an increase in students' desire to study.

Conclusions

Most language teachers acknowledge the goal of sparking student motivation as an essential part of enhancing actual language learning. Further, among Japanese learners, university appears to be a time of particularly low motivation (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). Based on the results of this assessment, exposure to English in a year-long

mandatory Freshman English class seems to have had a positive impact on student confidence and enjoyment of English, but not necessarily on motivation. It may be that a less conventional curriculum and set of classroom practices is needed to make a significant difference in students' level of motivation and belief in their ability to improve. More research is needed to determine the specific kinds of curricula, practices, and interventions that achieve the elusive goal of improving motivation. High learner motivation leads to the kind of commitment to lifelong learning that mastery of a foreign language requires; thus, the need to further outline the kind of classroom experience that improves motivation is clear.

Works Cited

- Dornyei, Z., & Otto, I. (1998). Motivation in action: A process model of L2 motivation. *Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, 4, 43-69.
- Farout, J., & Maruyama, M. (2004). A comparative study of proficiency and learner demotivation. *The Language Teacher*, 28(8), 3-9.

Self assessment
April 2009

	Yes	Sometimes	No
1. I feel confident speaking English.	_____	_____	_____
2. I like speaking English.	_____	_____	_____
3. I enjoy studying English.	_____	_____	_____
4. I want to improve my English.	_____	_____	_____
5. My strong point is reading.	_____	_____	_____
6. My strong point is writing.	_____	_____	_____
7. My strong point is listening.	_____	_____	_____
8. My strong point is speaking.	_____	_____	_____
9. I think English is important for my future.	_____	_____	_____
10. I have many chances to speak English in my daily life.	_____	_____	_____
11. I feel nervous speaking English.	_____	_____	_____
12. I liked my high school English class.	_____	_____	_____
13. My motivation to learn English is high.	_____	_____	_____
14. I believe I can improve my English.	_____	_____	_____
15. I think studying hard is the best way to learn English.	_____	_____	_____
16. I think having a good teacher is the best way to learn English.	_____	_____	_____
17. I think having a good textbook is very important.	_____	_____	_____
18. I want to use English in my job in the future.	_____	_____	_____